

## ***Is a Service Dog for me?***

Medicine is both a science and an art form. We know a variety of treatments and therapies have been helping patients heal throughout time. At one time if you broke or fractured a bone a *plaster of paris* cast was literally sculpted around the limb to make it immobile. This was an itchy and uncomfortable process, but it got better. Now there are sophisticated strap-on Velcro attachments that wrap around the leg to promote healing and the need for some *plaster of paris* casts are a thing of the past. Not long ago, physicians had a limited selection of drugs to treat various diseases. With the research and time we now have a variety of medications that provide everything from pain relief to cures for rare diseases that would amaze medical teams just 50 years ago. At one time there was little one could do to help those that lost a limb in war. The history books are filled with photos of carved legs or arms that provided little use other than aesthetic. With the robotics and micro-circuitry in today's devices, there are Soldiers that are getting arms and legs that are out of a sci-fi movie.

Everyone who loves dogs knows of the phrase that they are man's best friend. Therefore, very special dogs who serve to help people with a variety of illnesses and disabilities should not surprise anyone. Think about it. Dogs throughout history have been used for companionship. Anyone who has owned a dog understands the animal's desire to be a member of a pack can easily translate to being a member of a family. Dogs possess many qualities that include being a companion and aide, protecting, hunting and even herding. Dogs also seem to have an instinct for knowing when their owners want to play or simply need some comfort.

The medical community at large recognizes what 'man-kind' has known all along – that dogs in therapy roles, with the right temperament and training, are very valuable and are typically quite eager to be helpful to their owners. Many hospitals, including Army Medical Treatment Facilities, allow dogs as visitors as part of pet therapy programs and also have dogs as integral members of physical and occupational therapy clinics. Some natural benefits of a service dogs provide are:

- Increase in patience, impulse control, and regulating ones emotions.
- Increase in the ability to show affection.
- Better sleeping habits
- Less depression
- Decrease in being startled by loud noises or the unexpected
- A decrease in the use of pain medications
- An increase in the ability to be assertive
- Better parenting skills
- Less need to tell war stories and dwell in the past

- Less stress

## **What do I do to see if I qualify for a Service Dog?**

### **Step One: Talk to your doctor.**

The Army encourages you to see if a Service Dog is a good fit for you. Separating the desire of wanting a Service Dog and needing a service dog has to start with your primary care provider and there are eligibility and suitability requirements. The first major criterion is that you have to have a Permanent 3 profile in one or more of the PULHES categories. Qualified individuals are expected to require such a dog for a very long time (typically for life) and part of this means you are non-deployable.

### **Step Two: Review by the Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT).**

Once your primary care provider determines you are a suitable candidate and you have a Permanent 3 profile, they will help arrange a meeting with a board of healthcare professionals such as therapists, occupational therapists, Physical Evaluation Board members, Veteran Affairs Coordinators, Vets and Warrior Transition Unit Staff. Your primary care provider leads this team and a determination is collectively made about your case if a dog is needed. It is very important you keep all of your appointments regarding this process.

### **Step Three. Your case is referred to a Service dog provider.**

This will only happen if the MDT decided that a Service Dog would be beneficial to you. You are now about to possibly own a dog, so the Service Dog provider is going to decide if you have what it takes. This is reasonable because this living creature may be assigned to take care *of you*, but you are going to have to take care *of it*. The animal is your responsibility to feed, clean up after, and take care of. You are now its squad leader and being the squad leader you now have responsibilities. The Service Dog provider is going to talk to you, and may even observe how you relate to animals. Once a determination has been made by the Service Dog provider the assessment will be sent to the MDT. Again, it is very important to keep all of your appointments.

### **Step Four. Your Primary Care Manager prescribes the use of a Service Dog.**

Congratulations! The MDT determined you are eligible and suitable for a Service Dog. A prescription is written, however the next step is critical. You must now obtain approval from your chain of command.

### **Step Five: Obtain Command Approval.**

Your command cares about you and is responsible not only for the safety of you but the individuals around you. Everything that happens in the unit, on the base and installation at large is influenced by your command, the garrison command and the post command. Each may have their own requirements based on local, major command and Army policies. A multi-disciplinary team helped to make a determination of your need for a Service Dog and a dog provider organization made the determination that you are good with animals. The commander must now judge if you and your Service Dog can fit in with the pace of operations within the organization. The commander does have the right to deny, limit or put additional requirements on Service Dog requirements.

The commander will want you to update your Service Dog plan every year about how you are going to take care of the dog. It is suggested you at very least include in your Service Dog Plan the following:

- Where will your dog be housed?
- How will it be fed?
- What is the name and location of your vet?
- What training has the dog received?
- Acknowledgement that it will wear a service vest.
- Record of shots.
- Other requirements may vary according to your chain-of-command

### **Step Six: Receive orientation training from the dog provider.**

To ensure your safety, and that of others, there are requirements on where to obtain your Service Dog. Service Dogs are specifically chosen for their personality, how they fit with you, and are also trained with you in mind to help you navigate around your specific disability and help you to live more independently. You know how you are trained to do a certain mission? This dog has been trained for you and you are its mission. You and the dog must be in synch with each other and like any member of your squad must understand and carry out orders so must this dog. At the very least the animal must understand:

- "Come."
- "Down."
- "Sit."
- "Stay."
- "Leave it."

The dog understanding these commands is up to you and you will both get more comfortable with each other over time. While most Service Dogs are very well behaved, they must be on a leash and must wear a special vest or harness identifying them as a Service Dog.

**Step Seven: Welcome to the life of Service Dog ownership.**

Remember you are responsible for your Service Dog. This animal is there to help you, but you have the responsibility for its care, health, and general well being. You must regularly walk your dog and also get treatment for the dog when it is sick. This is not anyone else's responsibility. You are a team now and as much as you count on your Service Dog they will be counting on you as well.